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Family Support as a Buffer Against Job Burnout: Unpacking the Mediating Effect of Psychological Safety among Private University Administrators in China

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Abstract: This research examines the role of family support in alleviating job burnout among private university administrators in China, with a focus on psychological safety as a mediating mechanism. Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the research suggests that family support, as an external resource, interacts with job demands to reduce burnout through psychological safety. Survey data from 200 administrators revealed no direct relationship between family support and burnout. However, psychological safety fully mediated this link: family support enhanced perceptions of psychological safety, which subsequently reduced burnout. The findings highlight the importance of institutionalizing family support systems and fostering psychologically safe work environments to mitigate burnout. The valuable insights for university management in designing interventions to improve administrator well-being and job performance are also offered in this research.

Keywords: Job Burnout, Family Support, Psychological Safety, Private University Administrators, Job Demands-Resources Model, Conservation of Resources Theory

1. Introduction

Job burnout has emerged as a critical global issue (Otterbach et al., 2021), with a 2022 survey revealing that 90% of respondents across various industries were experiencing burnout (Karagöl & Kaya, 2022). In China, the situation is similarly concerning, with 14.4% of employees reporting moderate burnout and 41.4% experiencing severe burnout in 2022 (Statista, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic had significantly aggravated the situation, particularly within China's education sector, as shown in Figure 1. Specifically, before the pandemic, the burnout level was 5.14 out of 10 (51.4%), which increased to 6.44 (64.4%) after COVID-19 in 2022, where burnout rates had surged by nearly 13% compared to pre-pandemic levels (China Human Resources Development Network, 2023) (See Fig. 1).

As China's higher education system has rapidly expanded, with the gross enrollment rate reaching 60.2% in 2023 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022), private universities have faced growing pressures. Over the past two decades, private universities in China now represent over one-fifth of the total universities (Guangming Daily, 2023). However, these institutions are struggling to stay competitive in an increasingly crowded market, leading to financial constraints. To survive, many private universities have implemented cost-cutting measures, including workforce reductions and multi-role assignments for administrators (He, 2023). This shift has led to administrators being expected to take on teaching responsibilities in addition to their managerial duties. The pandemic only intensified these pressures, as financial strain resulted in downsizing and greater reliance on administrators to handle dual roles (Huang & Feng, 2021).

Although administrators play a crucial role in managing operations and enhancing the institution's image, the added teaching responsibilities have increased their stress levels, contributing to job burnout (Anggadwita et al., 2024). The dual roles have become overwhelming, making it essential to develop strategies to reduce their workload, prevent burnout, and improve overall performance (Leo et al., 2021). While many studies have examined burnout causes, most have focused on work engagement, stress, and job satisfaction among teachers, faculty, corporate employees, and healthcare workers (Gilmartin et al., 2024). Burnout among administrators, particularly in private universities, remains underexplored, despite being more pronounced due to the dual pressures of limited resources and high work demands.

Although administrators play a crucial role in university operations, their unique stressors and barriers are often overlooked, despite studies showing that burnout rates among them exceed those of faculty (Kerrissey et al., 2022).

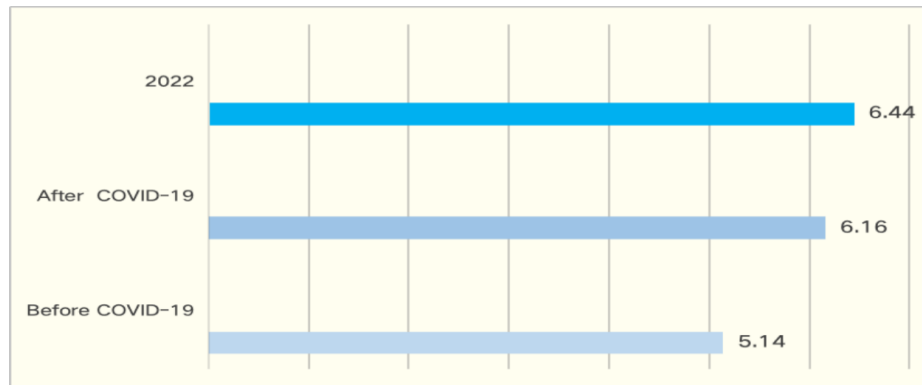


Fig. 1: Proportions of Burnout Dimensions in Education at Different Stages (China Human Resources Development Network, 2023)

Burnout not only hampers work efficiency but also negatively impacts mental health, leading to decreased job performance and overall well-being (Aronsson et al., 2017). Enhancing psychological safety in high-demand environments can help alleviate negative emotions caused by work pressure, enabling employees to face challenges with confidence and reduce anxiety (Zhao, 2024). For administrators, emotional support and practical assistance, particularly from family support, play a crucial role in balancing work and life, helping to alleviate burnout-related stress (Bao, 2023). These support mechanisms enable administrators to maintain high work efficiency and mental well-being, improving their ability to address work challenges effectively.

Administrators in private universities play a crucial role in higher education: 1) Manage and execute essential administrative tasks and are responsible for supporting the university's reform and development (Yan, 2024); 2) In addition to managing internal governance systems, they carry the important mission of both managing education and serving the community (Fang & Zuo, 2024); and 3) Administrators are vital supports for frontline teachers while also overseeing school administrative work, particularly in private institutions, where they fulfill both managerial and teaching responsibilities.

2. Literature Review

It was shown that previous studies usually attributed the occurrence of job burnout to the influence of internal or external factors, examined either intrinsic or extrinsic factors in isolation, failing to provide a comprehensive model that integrates both internal psychological stressors and external institutional pressures (Li et al., 2023). Most research has applied general stress models or workload theories without fully considering the complex interplay between individual and organizational determinants of burnout (Luo, 2023).

Existing literatures have carried out empirical research on external factors such as work pressure, work treatment, management system, work environment, social support, and social status. Collins and Meisley believed that job burnout always accompanies the profession, and work pressure is the source of job burnout (Collins et al., 2021). It was also believed that insufficient incentives and unreasonable incentives were one of the reasons for reducing work enthusiasm and motivation in the work of university administrators (Li et al., 2023). In severe cases, it will lead to people's depression, procrastination in work, and affect their job competence, resulting in job burnout (Tong, 2020). Unreasonable job settings will also reduce personal career expectations, thereby reduce their job competence and form job burnout. However, there are also studies from the aspects of working environment, organizational atmosphere, and leadership behavior. The results show that the tension and pressure of the working environment are negatively correlated with job burnout, and the stability of the organizational atmosphere has a positive effect on employees. Leadership behaviors can also lead to burnout (Xiang, 2020).

There are also studies that show that starting from its own factors can also lead to job burnout. For example, unstable emotional state and low job satisfaction will lead individuals to have negative attitudes towards their careers. At the same time, individuals adopting negative attitudes towards their occupations will lead to job burnout (Luo, 2023). It is also believed that the main reason for the job burnout of administrators is the lack of self-regulation, there are differences in the personalities of administrators, and a perfect incentive mechanism for administrators has not yet been established (Luo, 2023).

This research seeks to fill this gap by incorporating the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model and the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory as an integrated framework. The JD-R Model conceptualizes burnout as an imbalance between job demands and available resources (Bakker & De Vries, 2021). The JD-R (Job Demands-Resources) theory believes that job burnout is caused by excessive job demands and insufficient available resources (Maslach, 1986). This theory is suitable for analyzing the internal psychological mechanism (internal cause) and external environmental factors (external cause) of job burnout. JD-R mainly explains how job burnout occurs statically but fails to deeply analyze why burnout will continue to deteriorate at the individual level and eventually become a chronic problem, while COR theory posits that burnout occurs when employees experience prolonged resource depletion without adequate replenishment, leading to emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to introduce the COR theory to supplement the explanation of how job burnout continues to deepen at the individual level. However, according to the JD-R model and COR theory, the interaction between external and internal resources can better address excessive work demands and significantly mitigate burnout (Bakker & De Vries, 2021).

Consequently, this research seeks to fill the existing gap by examining the combined effects of external factors and internal psychological mechanisms on burnout within the specific context of private higher education institutions. By investigating four variables—work support, family support, professional identity, and psychological safety, with a particular focus on the mediating effects—this research aims to provide both theoretical and practical insights for alleviating burnout among private university administrators. By elucidating how supportive factors, through enhancing professional identity and psychological safety, can reduce burnout in response to high work demands, this research contributes to helping private universities effectively mitigate administrator burnout, enhance their work performance and psychological well-being, and ultimately bolster the competitiveness and long-term sustainability of private universities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Research design serves as the foundational blueprint of any study, systematically outlining the methodological choices that guide data collection, measurement, and analysis. It ensures coherence between the research objectives, theoretical framework, and methodological approach, ultimately enhancing the validity, reliability, and generalizability of findings (Creswell, 2015). The selection of an appropriate research design is contingent upon several factors, including the nature of the research question, epistemological stance, and the desired depth of inquiry (Saunders et al., 2009).

This research adopts a quantitative research method, CB-SEM (Holden & Lynch, 2004), given that there are effective theories of job burnout and sufficient literature to provide reference for the formulation of research frameworks and hypotheses, a deductive method was adopted in this research. The core goal of quantitative research is to verify hypotheses or models through statistical analysis, which requires high-quality, standardized and structured data. Self-administered questionnaires are a widely used data collection tool. Due to their efficiency, economy and anonymity, they are considered particularly suitable for large-scale sample surveys (Leavy, 2022).

Specifically, this research uses existing theories to construct hypothesized relationships, uses university administrators as samples, collects quantitative data using self-administered questionnaires, and uses appropriate statistical analysis techniques to test hypotheses. The results of empirical tests should be objective, not prone to bias, and generalizable to different contexts. The goal of the questioning is to collect various points of view from respondents. By analyzing various viewpoints and answering questions regarding the research objectives and research questions as shown in Table 1, this research was able to draw more comprehensive conclusions.

Table 1: List of Research Objectives and Questions

Research objectives		Research questions	
1	To assess the impact of family support (FS) on job burnout (JB) among private university administrators in China.	1	What is the effect of family support (FS) on job burnout (JB) among private university administrators in China?
2	To analyze the role of psychological safety (PS) in mitigating job burnout (JB) among private university administrators in China.	2	What effect does psychological safety (PS) have on job burnout (JB) among private university administrators in China?
3	To assess the impact of family support (FS) on psychological safety (PS) among private university administrators in China.	3	What is the effect of family support (FS) on psychological safety (PS) among private university administrators in China?

continued

4	To evaluate the mediating effect of psychological safety (PS) in the effect of family support (FS) on job burnout (JB) among private university administrators in China.	4	Does psychological safety (PS) mediate the relationship between family support (FS) and job burnout (JB) among private university administrators in China?
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3.2 Data Collection

This research focuses on 200 administrators in private universities who undertake both administrative and teaching tasks from private universities in China randomly. The data collection process has followed ethical conduct to protect the privacy of the respondents, which are essential to ensure the legality, morality, and trustworthiness of research (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This research collected data by drop-off questionnaires through a field survey. The survey is self-administered, with respondents completing the questionnaires on their own.

Questionnaires were randomly distributed to administrators in China of different ages, genders, education level, job positions, marital status, income, and working years, ensuring diverse participation samples, which accounted for 200. Each university had a designated contact person responsible for overseeing the collection of completed questionnaires, ensuring progress within the specified timeframe, and reporting back to the researcher. The step-by-step process of data collection for this research is as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Process of Data Collection

Stages	Time	Activity
Stage 1	Week 1	give the questionnaire to each contact person
Stage 2	Week 2	collect the returned questionnaire
Stage 3	Week 3-4	if the questionnaire hasn't been all collected, add one week data collection continues until the target number of respondents is reached

3.3 Research Design

To analyze the data, both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted (Hair Jr. et al., 2019). Descriptive statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted to make inferences about the population based on the sample data. Given the characteristics of this research, focusing on testing relationships derived from relationship theory, the Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) is designed to reproduce the covariance matrix of the observed data, focusing on model fit and theoretical validation (Hair Jr et al., 2019), which is the more appropriate method. Additionally, CB-SEM's ability to assess latent variable relationships with robust model fit, making it the preferred approach for analyzing the hypothesized relationships. In this research, a two-stage approach was employed for SEM analysis. Following the suggestion, this research first validated the measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) before testing the proposed structural model, as shown in Figure 2.

Like any other statistical analysis techniques, SEM requires several assumptions to be satisfied, including normality, absence of multicollinearity, and no significant outliers (Kline, 2023). An initial screening of the total of 200 responses in SPSS using the frequencies command revealed that no variables contained missing values. Furthermore, the validity of SEM analysis is dependent on meeting five assumptions, including normality, outliers, multicollinearity, linearity, and homoscedasticity (Garson, 2012). To determine whether the collected sample data follow a normal distribution, skewness and kurtosis tests were conducted in this research, while all measures fall within the acceptable range of ± 2 (Garson, 2012), which confirmed that the data was normally distributed.

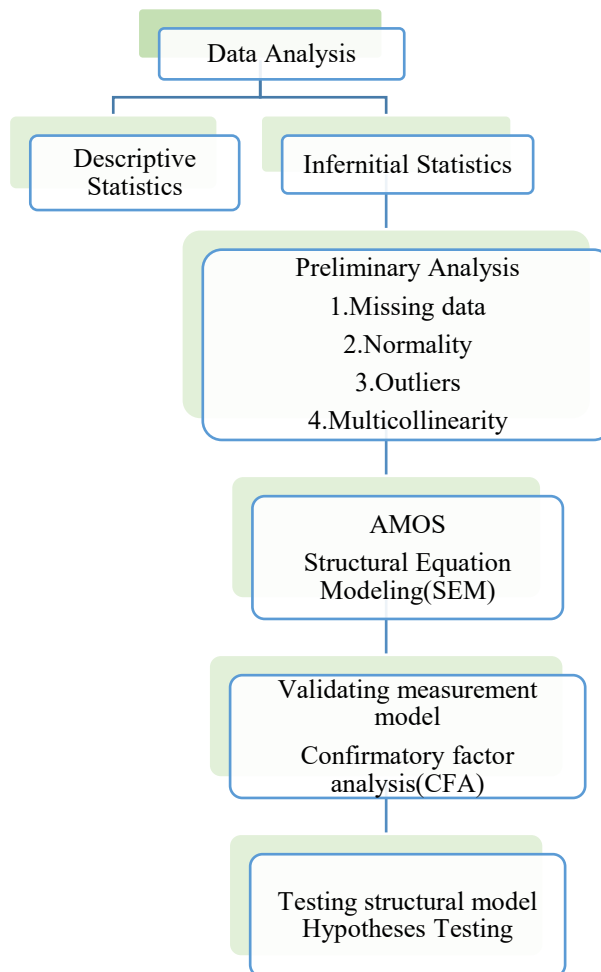


Fig. 2: Overview of Data Analysis

Next, the standardized z-scores for all observations were carefully examined. The analysis revealed that none of the observations fell outside the threshold of ± 4 , indicating the absence of extreme cases, indicating the suitability of the data for used in further analysis. Subsequently, adopting a stringent criterion of $p < 0.001$ for Mahalanobis distance, two extreme cases were identified as significant outliers as shown in Table 3 (Hair Jr et al., 2019). Consequently, one outlier was removed to enhance the reliability of the analysis, leaving a refined data of 199 observations for further analysis.

Table 3: Analysis of Multivariate Outliers

Observation number	Mahalanobis d^2	P
102	55.685	0.000

After outlier removal, Mardia's coefficient of multivariate kurtosis decreased to 28.022, which is lower than suggested by Mardia that if less than $p^*(p + 2)$, then multivariate normality is satisfied (Mardia, 1970), significantly below the threshold of 323 [$17 \times (17+2)$] for 17 variables. This satisfies Mardia's criterion for multivariate normality. Additionally, multicollinearity assessment showed all factor loadings and inter-construct correlations were below 0.9, indicating it is not a significant concern. The data are therefore suitable for subsequent analysis.

To address common method bias, we conducted Harman's single-factor test and a comparative fit analysis (Podsakoff et al., 2024). An exploratory factor analysis forcing all items into a single factor explained only 28.768% of the variance, below the 50% threshold, suggesting no significant bias. Additionally, a confirmatory single-factor model demonstrated significantly poorer fit than the proposed multi-factor model. Both analyses indicate common method bias is not a significant concern in this study.

Table 4: Standardized Factor Loading

Item		Variable	Estimate
a1	<---	FS	0.692
a2	<---	FS	0.753
a3	<---	FS	0.603
a4	<---	FS	0.801
a5	<---	FS	0.778
a6	<---	PS	0.755
a7	<---	PS	0.689
a8	<---	PS	0.713
a9	<---	PS	0.754
a10	<---	PS	0.777
a11	<---	JB	0.716
a12	<---	JB	0.594
a13	<---	JB	0.786
a14	<---	JB	0.698
a15	<---	JB	-0.561
a16	<---	JB	-0.577
a17	<---	JB	-0.603

This study employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using maximum likelihood estimation (MLE). The model demonstrated a significant chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 193.651$, $df = 116$, $p < .001$). Fit indices indicated satisfactory fit: the normed chi-square ($\chi^2/df = 1.669$) was within the acceptable range (1-5), CFI (0.939) and TLI (0.928) exceeded 0.90, and RMSEA (0.059) and SRMR (0.032) were below 0.08. Collectively, these results support a satisfactory measurement model fit. The measurement model's robustness was further assessed through construct reliability and validity. As shown in Table 5, all constructs demonstrate adequate reliability with composite reliability (CR) values ranging from 0.734 to 0.857. Convergent validity is supported by average variance extracted (AVE) values between 0.653 and 0.738. These results confirm internal consistency of the measurement items for their respective constructions.

Table 5: Standardized Factor Loading & AVE & CR

Item		Variable	Estimate	CR	AVE
a1	<---	FS	0.797	0.849	0.729
a2	<---	FS	0.756		
a3	<---	FS	0.797		
a4	<---	FS	0.810		
a5	<---	FS	0.772		
a6	<---	PS	0.787	0.857	0.738
a7	<---	PS	0.806		
a8	<---	PS	0.684		
a9	<---	PS	0.786		
a10	<---	PS	0.800		
a11	<---	JB	0.846	0.734	0.653
a12	<---	JB	0.783		
a13	<---	JB	0.797		
a14	<---	JB	0.809		
a15	<---	JB	0.809		
a16	<---	JB	0.748		
a17	<---	JB	0.774		

Next, hypotheses testing, which is a critical step to evaluate the relationships between constructs proposed in the research model (Hair Jr et al., 2019). An examination of hypothesized relationships was performed through structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS. Similar to the measurement model, the structural model as shown in Figure 3 is checked on the goodness-of-fit, which indices for the structural model are all within the accepted thresholds. Hence, the overall model fit is adequate to test the proposed hypotheses.

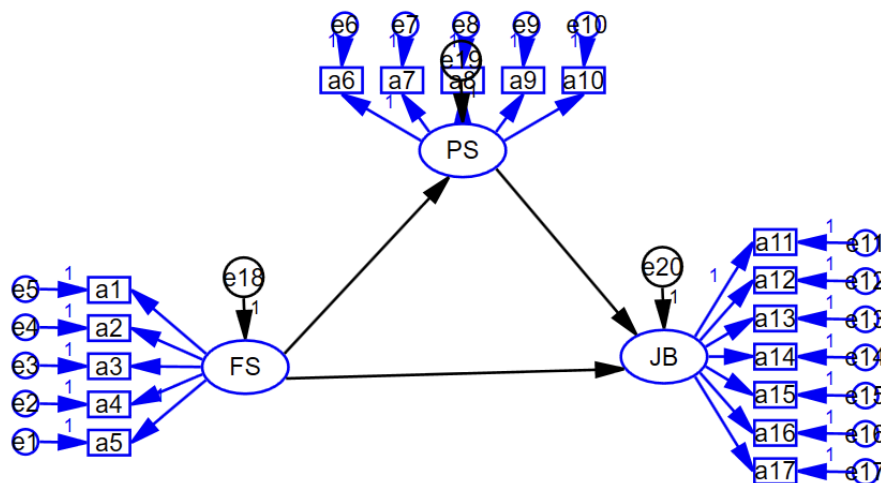


Fig. 3: The Structural Model

As for the model used to test the direct and mediate effect, which is to determine the effect of family support (FS), psychological safety (PS) on job burnout (JB), the mediating effect of psychological safety (PS) in the relationship between family support (FS) and job burnout (JB) was analyzed using the bootstrapping method. Results showed that the direct effect of family support (FS) hypothesized on job burnout (JB), also has a negative effect. The effect of psychological safety (PS) hypothesized on job burnout (JB), is also supported, suggesting that higher levels of psychological safety (PS) are associated with lower levels of job burnout (JB).

Observing the p values to determine the significant factor, it was found that the direct effect of FS on JB had a not significant p value with 0.071 ($p < 0.05$ – significant, > 0.05 not significant), indicating that the Hypothesis between FS on JB is not supported. The mediation results further indicate an insignificant direct effect of family support (FS) on job burnout (JB) ($p = 0.099$). Conversely, the indirect effect mediated by psychological safety was significant ($p = 0.002$). These findings support a model of full mediation.

4. Discussions

This study thoroughly examined the intricate relationships between family support, psychological safety, and job burnout among administrators at private universities in China. While previous research has frequently highlighted the role of family support as a direct buffer against job-related stress, the findings of this study provide a more nuanced understanding. Contrary to initial expectations, the quantitative analysis revealed that family support does not have a statistically significant direct effect on job burnout. This challenges the commonly accepted assumption that family support directly alleviates job burnout.

However, upon further exploration through comprehensive mediation analysis, the study uncovered a crucial insight: psychological safety fully mediates the relationship between family support and job burnout (Artz et al., 2022). This means that the protective effect of family support on burnout is not direct but rather operates through its ability to enhance employees' psychological safety within the workplace. In this context, psychological safety is defined as a critical psychological resource that allows individuals to feel secure in expressing themselves and engaging authentically at work, without fear of negative repercussions (Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

Specifically, the study found that family support contributes to increasing psychological safety, which in turn significantly reduces burnout symptoms. This indirect pathway suggests that family support plays a foundational role by creating a more supportive and secure personal environment, which employees then translate into a greater sense of confidence and safety at work. The enhanced psychological safety then acts as a buffer against the overwhelming demands and pressures of the job, enabling administrators to handle challenges more effectively and without compromising their well-being.

The pattern of full mediation observed in this study emphasizes that the protective effect of family support against job burnout is not immediate. Rather, it unfolds gradually through the empowerment of administrators' sense of safety and support in the workplace. This finding is aligned with previous research that underscores the importance of psychological safety as a critical element in maintaining healthy work dynamics and preventing burnout. It highlights that family support, although vital, does not function in isolation, but rather as an essential antecedent that influences burnout through a complex interaction with workplace dynamics and interpersonal safety.

These findings are not only significant for understanding the mechanisms of burnout but also for shaping future workplace strategies in higher education settings. They suggest that psychological safety should be deliberately nurtured within institutional support frameworks. Institutions that aim to mitigate burnout must recognize the importance of psychological safety as a protective mechanism and adopt practices that foster it within their organizational cultures. Initiatives that promote open communication, provide emotional and psychological support, and ensure that employees feel respected and valued, are all vital components of such frameworks.

By investing in the psychological safety of their staff, universities can create an environment where administrators feel more empowered to engage with challenges constructively, ultimately reducing burnout. Such initiatives are not only critical for improving individual well-being but also for the broader effectiveness and sustainability of the institution, especially in high-stakes educational contexts where demands are typically intense (MacCurtain et al., 2018). Consequently, this study highlights the importance of integrated support systems that combine family support and workplace initiatives focused on psychological safety, creating a robust buffer against the stressors and burnout often faced by administrators in the education sector. Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for a holistic approach to employee well-being, one that encompasses both personal (family support) and professional (psychological safety) dimensions. This comprehensive perspective is crucial in fostering resilient, engaged, and productive employees, particularly in environments where the stakes are high and the pressures significant.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of family support and psychological safety on job burnout among administrators in private universities in China and concluded that family support had no significant impact on job burnout, but psychological safety played a complete mediating role, which suggests the impact of family support on job burnout is primarily transmitted through psychological safety. Collectively, this study establishes that family support exerts its beneficial influence indirectly, operating through the enhancement of psychological safety to alleviate job burnout among educational administrators. This outcome substantiates the necessity for implementing multifaceted support frameworks specifically designed to cultivate psychological safety, thereby offering a potential pathway to reduce burnout within high-pressure educational environments.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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